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The role of ideas in EU responses to international crises:

Comparing the cases of Iraq and Iran

Benjamin Kienzle

Abstract

This article examines how cognitive and normative ideas influence the ability of the European Union (EU) to formulate common policies in response to international crises such as the 2002/2003 Iraq crisis and the Iranian nuclear crisis (since 2002). It argues that in crisis situations, i.e. in highly uncertain circumstances, ideas become often the principal guide for policy-makers. More specifically, ideas foster interpretations of a crisis along several core themes, above all, how the crisis issue is perceived, which means are deemed to be legitimate and/or effective and, depending on the particular crisis, how other relevant themes are seen, e.g. the appropriate relation with the United States. Thus, the formulation of common EU crisis responses depends on the convergence of these interpretations in member states – as in the Iran crisis. On the contrary, if member states' interpretations diverge beyond a common “ideational space” – as in the case of Iraq – dissonance will be the probable outcome.

Keywords

Ideas and foreign policy; cognitive and normative ideas; European foreign and security policy; international crises; Iran; Iraq

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Introduction

Research on ideational factors in the social sciences has become increasingly influential (Béland and Cox, 2011), especially on cognitive and normative ideas, i.e. ideas that respectively 'elucidate "what is and what to do"' and that 'indicate "what is good or bad about what is" in light of "what one ought to do"' (Schmidt, 2008: 306).¹ The European Union (EU) has been at the centre stage of ideational research early on, most notably in integration studies (Jachtenfuchs et al., 1998; Parsons, 2002) and in economic and monetary policy (Jabko, 2006; McNamara, 1999; Quaglia, 2004). However, apart from a few exceptions (Croft, 2000; Howorth, 2004), the controversial topic of EU foreign policy cooperation has received little attention, even though various analyses have

shown the added value of idea based research in foreign and security policies (Goldstein and Keohane, 1993; Katzenstein, 1996). It is, therefore, in need of further research (see Bickerton et al., 2011: 10).

Most research using ideas as variables focuses on nation states, even in studies of the European Union. The explanation of cooperation between states as in the case of the European Union is usually left to one specific function of ideas, namely to ‘focal points’ (Garrett and Weingast, 1993) or related concepts used in ‘strategic constructivism’ (Jabko, 2006) that highlight the unifying capacity of certain key ideas. However, in the concrete case of the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) such unifying ideas exist only, if at all, as relatively weak concepts, e.g. effective multilateralism. Nevertheless, ideas may still have explanatory power regarding EU cooperation – or its failure – in international affairs. Both idea based research in the economic realm (McNamara, 1999; Quaglia, 2004) and reflexive approaches to norms (Puetter and Wiener, 2007) suggest that cognitive and normative ideas – or the concrete meaning of certain ideas or norms – in member states influence the (in) ability to establish common policies at the level of the EU. The key issue is how in a given situation ideas in individual EU member states play out in the CFSP.

More specifically, it will be argued that cognitive and normative ideas in member states may foster either converging or diverging interpretations of specific international circumstances in terms of issue at stake, instrumentality, i.e. ‘... the instruments or

means that states find available and appropriate' (Kowert and Legro, 1996: 463), and in terms of other factors such as transatlantic relations, thus either facilitating or impeding common EU policies. The crucial question that this article will deal with is, in particular, if these interpretations converge so much at the level of the EU that they fall within the limits of a common ideational space separating possible and impossible agreement on common policies in international crises – thus, bringing about consensus – or if they diverge beyond the limits of this space, leading to dissonance. In this way, the article contributes to what has been recently identified as one of the key research challenges in European foreign and security policy: 'why is it that European cooperation in foreign, security, and defense policy (...) seems to work and hold together in some specific instances yet not in others?' (Krotz and Maher, 2011: 549).

Admittedly, in an essentially intergovernmental policy area as the CFSP, where all member states are de facto veto players, ideas may not be the only variables that can explain the (in) ability of the EU to act collectively in international affairs. However, the existing idea based research suggests that at least in circumstances of high uncertainty where no clear pre-given interests exist, ideas can make a significant difference, as they help decision-makers to make sense of a given situation (McNamara, 1999; Howorth, 2004). It is, thus, in these circumstances where ideas may have a decisive impact on the EU's ability to formulate a common response or not. The high uncertainty of international crises, not least in the field of security, turns crisis situations into

particularly suitable case studies to explore the role of ideas (see Bratberg, 2011). In the field of non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) two crises have occurred that are potentially very illustrative, as they led in one instance to failed and, in the other case, to substantial (though not necessarily successful) European foreign policy output: the 2003 Iraq war and its prelude (Menon, 2004; Puetter and Wiener, 2007) and the Iranian nuclear crisis after 2002 (Dryburgh, 2008; Sauer, 2008; Harnisch, 2007).

The article begins with an outline of the framework that conceptualises the role of ideas in either facilitating or impeding EU policies in international crises. After a brief justification of the case study selection, I will proceed examining empirically how cognitive and normative ideas led to diverging or converging interpretations of the Iraq and Iran crises and, thus, to either dissonance or consensus in the EU. Following other studies on European foreign and security policy (Mérand et al., 2011; Wagnsson, 2010), the main focus will be on the dominant interpretations in the key member states – Britain, France and Germany – as within the constraints of this article it is not possible to examine in detail all the idiosyncratic processes that led to certain interpretations in all member states. Finally, I will outline what this analysis reveals about the ideational space mentioned above and link it to the broader research on European foreign and security policies.

Conceptual framework

Generally, the EU deals with international problems such as the Iraqi and Iranian crises in the context of the CFSP, formerly the EU's so-called second pillar. Institutionally, this means that basically all decisions have to be taken by consensus or collective agreement, i.e. the set-up of the CFSP remains essentially intergovernmental (Wagner, 2003). Consequently, some analysts are quite sceptical about the capability of the EU to act independently of the interests of its member states in international affairs (Hoffmann, 2000). However, the institutionalization and socialization literature has shown that the clash of 'national interests' of member states is not the norm in the CFSP. On the contrary, during the last 40 years the EU has established numerous institutions, legal rules, norms and habits such as the well-known coordination reflex that facilitate increased cooperation among member states (Smith, 2004). An emerging body of literature on Brussels based bureaucracies and institutions has even highlighted the increasingly prominent role of supranational elements in EU decision-making in foreign and security policy (Cross, 2007; Vanhoonacker et al., 2010). This article does not go so far as to concede supranational elements a dominant role in international crises, in particular if they are highly politicised and mediatised (see Vanhoonacker et al., 2010: 23). In line with recent findings from the network literature on the EU, it assumes that '... a handful of traditional state actors retain strategic positions vis-a-vis weaker supranational and non-state actors' (Mérand et al., 2011: 122). At the same time,

however, it maintains that these state actors do not necessarily represent pre-given, stable ‘national interests’ of member states in Brussels during international crises. That is, EU action or inaction is not necessarily the result of negotiated compromises between ‘national interests’.

Arguably, pre-given interests do not play a dominant role in international crises, as they usually confront policy-makers with novel circumstances, where it is not clear what the issue is, how it can be dealt with and how to interpret intervening factors such as important third countries. That is, one of the key characteristics of international crises is their uncertainty, often aggravated by the lack of reliable information. As long as no obvious economic or strategic interests have been established before, e.g. in the form of vital economic relations with a crisis area, the reaction of actors in such situations is rather based on what they believe is the actual issue and on what is the most effective and legitimate way to deal with it (see McNamara, 1999: 457). In other words, it is based on cognitive and normative ideas. More specifically, ideas lead to ‘policy prescriptions’, i.e. ‘precise causal ideas that facilitate policymaking by specifying how to solve particular policy problems’ (Tannenwald, 2005: 16; see Schmidt, 2008: 306).

However, in intergovernmental contexts as the EU, cognitive and normative ideas do not necessarily have the same consequences among different actors. Although EU member states share common ‘fundamental norms’ (Puetter and Wiener, 2007), they do not foster directly coherent policy prescriptions in the EU. Member states may contest,

for example, what these ‘fundamental norms’ mean in practice (Puetter and Wiener, 2007). Likewise, member states may simply be influenced by different – and maybe contradictory – ideas, as a recent study of the EU as a normative power has highlighted (Wagnsson, 2010). For example, some member states may favour in a certain crisis military intervention based on the defence of human right norms, while others may reject such actions based on the equally well established norm of non-intervention. After all, the EU as a whole does not have a fully-fledged common strategic culture, as the literature in this field concedes (Meyer, 2006). In brief, different, or different meanings of cognitive and normative ideas may lead to diverging policy prescriptions that are difficult to reconcile in ‘coordinative discourses’ (see Schmidt, 2008: 310-311) between national and European policy-makers at the EU level. Ultimately, this will lead to incoherent or no policy formulation at all.

Yet, despite these potentially disrupting consequences of ideas, they also have certain characteristics that benefit common policy responses to international crises. Most notably, they are relatively ‘malleable’ (Béland and Cox, 2011: 10), especially in comparison with fixed interests, and leave usually different policy response options open, i.e. they constrain but do not determine options (see Campbell, 1998: 384-385). This facilitates greatly agreement in the aforementioned coordinative discourses between policy-makers, particularly in such highly institutionalised settings as the CFSP, where actors are ‘...structurally bound to co-operate in other policy areas’

(Howorth, 2004: 229; see also Schmidt, 2008: 313). Therefore, the formulation of EU level policies in the international arena can be generally achieved if ideas foster broadly converging interpretations of a crisis among actors. Similar to the ‘congruence building’ between emerging global and existing local norms in the norm localization literature (Acharya, 2011), the crucial issue is not the complete acceptance or rejection of a specific idea in a crisis but building congruence between the emerging common interpretation of a crisis and the interpretations in different EU member states. Furthermore, it is possible that among deeply integrated states simply similar cognitive and normative ideas dominate, bringing about converging interpretations of specific events and, ultimately, converging policy prescriptions.

In order to analyse concrete cases of convergence or divergence of crisis interpretations at the EU level it is necessary to focus on the relevant cognitive and normative ideas in international crises. In short, which ideas matter? First, cognitive and normative ideas that influence the perception of the issue at stake are crucial. In the words of Béland, ‘ideas participate in the construction of the issues and problems that enter the policy agenda’ (Béland, 2009: 704). Secondly, as Mehta (2011: 33) has pointed out, the definition of an issue or problem does not determine the actual policy choices to deal with that issue or problem. Thus, once an issue is defined in a specific way, certain cognitive and normative ideas also inform how it should be dealt with. They help to answer questions about the effectiveness and legitimacy of certain policy responses.

More specifically, ideas constrain the available options that are considered to be effective or legitimate (Campbell, 1998: 385; see also Kowert and Legro, 1996: 463-465). Thirdly, apart from the ideas that fulfil these basic functions in an international crises, other ideas may also be relevant, in particular those that interpret intervening factors. Depending on the crises there can be one or several such factors, e.g. the relation with other crisis responders, historical relations with the countries involved in the crisis or economic considerations. In view of the case studies (see below), this article examines exemplarily one issue: the relation with the United States.

As Figure 1 below shows, each function of cognitive and normative ideas can be imagined as an axis along which different interpretations exist: The x-axis shows how an issue can be perceived in a given international crisis; the y-axis represents the election of different instruments or means and the z-axis displays the distinct relations with the United States. Furthermore, each axis has two ends of opposing extreme interpretations, each of which constitutes a Weberian ideal-type: The x-axis lies between two ideal-types of issue perception: An issue can be perceived, on the one hand, as an absolute key priority and, on the other hand, as a mere non-issue. In practice, most of the time the actual issue perception lies somewhere between the two extremes. The ends of the y-axis show the ideal-types of the two most radical forms of measures that can be taken in foreign affairs: military force and persuasion. Depending on what is believed to be effective and/or legitimate, different types of policy

prescriptions are thinkable between these two sets of measures, e.g. peacekeeping, sanctions or conditionality. The z-axis, finally, displays the type of transatlantic relations different or different meanings of ideas may foster: At one end, there are the staunchly Atlanticist relations based on bandwagoning whereas at the other end, radical Europeanism prefers counterbalancing America's power in the world. Once more, many intermediate forms of preferred transatlantic relationships are possible along this axis.

-- Figure 1 presented on separate sheet at the end of the article --

It is assumed that within EU member states cognitive and normative ideas can foster almost any interpretation along the three axes. The more these interpretations move towards one of the six extremes the unlikelier it is that consensus can be reached. On the contrary, if the interpretations converge towards the centre, the more compromise is likely. Depending on the issue at stake the consensus can obviously move to a certain extent towards one or another extreme, but may not go beyond certain limits. If the three axes are put into a three-dimensional chart – highlighting, thus, the ultimately

interlinked character of the axes – these limits can be imagined as a flexible sphere that connects the border points between likely and unlikely consensus on the three axes (see grey sphere in Figure 1). It is in this ideational space that common foreign policy can be actually established. However, if the interpretations in one or more member states approach too much one of the extremes or opposing extremes simultaneously, they will move beyond this space of likely consensus. Thus, the result will be dissonance among member states and the failure of the EU to respond forcefully to an international crisis.

Case study selection

The conceptual framework requires at least two comparable case studies to demonstrate how it works in practice: on the one hand, one case of forceful EU policy output where converging interpretations along the three axes of Figure 1 fall within the common ideational space and, on the other hand, another case study of weak output where diverging interpretations remain outside this space. The 2003 Iraq war and its prelude and the early Iranian nuclear crisis (2002-2006) are useful case studies in this regard.² In terms of the strength of the EU policy output, they are almost two ideal cases: Whereas the EU's lack of a common response to the Iraq war is generally seen as one of the major failures of the CFSP, the common European response to the Iranian nuclear crisis is widely seen as one of the strongest in the last decade, in particular before 2006, when China, Russia and the United States joined the EU in its negotiations with Iran.

Although other, less clear-cut cases might be useful for follow-up research, the unambiguous difference between the Iran and Iraq case allows examining the utility of the model of the conceptual framework in its clearest form. Moreover, important similarities make the two cases comparable from an analytical point of view. Most notably, the type of international crisis was virtually the same. Both crises were major non-proliferation crises involving alleged WMD programmes, they occurred roughly around the same time in the same region and they were characterised by substantial transatlantic disagreement about how to deal with them. While the use of force by the United States in the case of Iraq certainly constitutes an important difference between the two cases, this did not preclude European consensus in Iraq or predispose agreement in the case of Iran.

Apart from the comparability of the Iraq and Iran cases, the two cases also appear to be particularly worthwhile case studies for an idea based approach: First, both the regime in Tehran and the pre-invasion regime in Baghdad are or were very closed non-democratic political systems where it was extremely difficult to obtain reliable information, in particular intelligence information about their alleged WMD programmes. This led to circumstances of high uncertainty for policy-makers, i.e. situations that are particularly conducive to the role of ideas. Secondly, obvious material interests by certain member states, which may override an idea based approach, have been largely absent, most notably, in the commercial field. Although some member

states had important commercial relationships with Iraq and Iran, the existing literature agrees that they were not decisive in the two crises (Gordon and Shapiro, 2004: 77-78; Smeland, 2004: 44).

By tracing the relevant processes and employing counterfactuals where useful, this article attempts to show how it were ultimately cognitive and normative ideas regarding the three different, though ultimately interwoven, areas of issue perception, use of means and transatlantic relations that have fostered diverging and converging interpretations in the respective case of Iraq and Iran. In each case, specific indicators are used to identify the different interpretations in declarations, statements, conclusions, speeches, interviews and relevant secondary literature – both at the level of national leaders in Britain, France and Germany and of the EU itself. Along the axis of issue perception the indicators distinguish between interpretations that emphasise either (a) the direct and immediate threat, (b) the indirect and long-term risk or concern or (c) the lack of threat, risk or concern emanating from an issue. Regarding the use of means, the analysis focuses on the interpretations of either the use of force, sanctions, negotiations or persuasion as the most effective and/or legitimate ways to deal with an issue. Finally, the analysis of the interpretations along the axis of transatlantic relations examines to what extent they emphasise, on the one hand, Europe's dependence on the United States and the value of the transatlantic relationship and, on the other hand, the autonomy of

Europe vis-a-vis the United States and the value of an independent European and/or national way.

Convergence and divergence in the EU Iraq and Iran policies

Iraq

Iraq had been on the radar of policy-makers in EU countries well before the 2002/2003 Iraq crisis broke out. However, in the wake of the crisis, Iraq became clearly a key issue in the eyes of several EU member states. The best documented case in this regard is arguably the United Kingdom.³ Although Britain's participation in the invasion is a hotly debated controversy, there appears to be widespread agreement on how the crucial decision-makers – largely Tony Blair, then the British Prime Minister, and his inner circle – perceived pre-invasion Iraq as a key issue for British foreign and security policy (Kennedy-Pipe and Vickers, 2007: 209-215; Bluth, 2004: 884): 'My judgement as prime minister is that this threat is real, growing and of an entirely different nature to any conventional threat to our security that Britain has faced before' (Blair, 2003). This perception has its roots not only in cognitive ideas, i.e. in what was believed to be an advanced Iraqi WMD programme, but also in Saddam Hussein's violation of normative ideas, in particular in the form of widespread human rights violations and his alleged links with international terrorism. Although Blair and his inner circle might have exaggerated the actual threat stemming from the regime in Baghdad and misused

intelligence information, there exists little doubt that the Prime Minister himself believed (rightly or wrongly) that Saddam Hussein posed a very serious threat that had to be removed urgently (Kennedy-Pipe and Vickers, 2007: 212; Hoggett, 2005: 422). As the so-called 'Letter of Eight' (Aznar et al., 2003) and similar statements show, several leaders of EU member states shared publicly this perception of the Iraq issue.

To a certain extent, this perception is also reflected in EU documents, thus showing in how far EU member states were actually able to find consensus (see Presidency of the European Union, 2003). But at heart, some member states did not share Britain's and other's perception of Iraq being a key threat that requires immediate action to overthrow its regime, as the evidence that linked the regime in Iraq with an existing WMD programme did not completely convince them (Gordon and Shapiro, 2004: 83; Finnemore, 2005: 202). This perception has been already well documented in several studies on France and Germany during the Iraq crisis (Coicaud, 2006; Davidson, 2011: 150; Forsberg, 2005: 223; Müller, 2003: 6-7; Pond, 2005: 36). Joschka Fischer, then the German Foreign Minister, spoke, for example, only about suspicions concerning the Iraqi WMD programme: 'Quite a few states suspect that Saddam Hussein's regime is withholding relevant information and concealing military capabilities. This strong suspicion has to be dispelled beyond any doubt' (Fischer, 2003). Thus, the opponents of the invasion rather believed that in spite of Saddam Hussein's delaying tactics there was still sufficient time for further United Nations (UN) backed inspections to determine if

Iraq was pursuing a clandestine WMD programme or not, as stipulated by UN Security Council Resolution 1441 of November 2002. Especially in the case of the French leadership this was ultimately decisive in its opposition to another UN Security Council Resolution authorizing explicitly the use of force in early 2003 (Gordon and Shapiro, 2004: 146-153). In brief, distinct cognitive ideas about ‘what is’ – immediate threat or long-term risk – and normative ideas about ‘what should be’ – regime change or change of regime behaviour – fostered diverging perceptions of the Iraq issue along the issue perception continuum, thus making a common European extremely difficult.

Closely related to the diverging perception of the Iraq issue was the question how it should be dealt with. Since the United States was increasingly determined to intervene militarily in Iraq, the key question was the potential participation in military actions led by the United States. In essence, the EU had the option to support, tolerate or oppose the war collectively. An important dimension in this regard was certainly the transatlantic relationship, as will be shown further on. However, it would be too simplistic to explain crucial decisions about war and peace merely in terms of transatlantic relations. As the research on a European strategic culture has made clear (Meyer, 2006), specific beliefs about the use of force play also a major role. That is, apart from the transatlantic relationship, it were also specific ideas about instrumentality that led to the acceptance or rejection of concrete means in Iraq. The case of Britain shows how at least some of the supporters of the Iraq war were influenced by their own ideas about the legitimacy

and effectiveness of military means (Kennedy-Pipe and Vickers, 2007: 207; see Bluth, 2004: 875). In Blair's public statements it becomes clear that he believed that a military invasion was both more legitimate and effective than the available alternatives: 'The judgment is this: would it have been better or more practical to have contained him through continuing sanctions and weapons inspections, or was this inevitably going to be, at some point, a policy that failed...?' (Blair, 2004; see also Gordon and Shapiro, 2004: 175). Blair and his supporters had particularly the failures of the international Iraq policies in the 1990s to contain and disarm Iraq effectively in their mind. According to Bluth (2004: 871), 'The case of war rested on the premise that the containment of Iraq through sanctions was becoming ineffective and was morally unacceptable because of its effects on the Iraqi population...'.

At the same time, the opponents of the use of force believed that containment, sanctions and inspections had been working in Iraq. Therefore, they advocated their continuing use, especially regarding the alleged Iraqi WMD programme: 'Precisely because of the effectiveness of the work of the inspectors, we must continue to seek a peaceful solution to the crisis' (Fischer, 2003; see also Pond, 2005: 34). Germany did also see the use of force as an inappropriate means in the Iraq case (Forsberg, 2005; Müller, 2003: 18). This does not mean that war was excluded on principle by all. Especially France kept its options open, at least until January 2003. However, they finally concluded that further inspections could still work and that a military invasion was (still) not justified (Gordon

and Shapiro, 2004: 116). Thus, ultimately distinct normative ideas about which means are legitimate and cognitive ideas about which are more effective in the case of Iraq at that specific point of time helped to facilitate support for diverging means among EU member states – use of force in one case and further inspections in the other.

Still, this did not mean that consensus would have been entirely impossible in Iraq. Just one month before the invasion, the French government offered the US administration a ‘gentlemen’s agreement’ that would have avoided at least an open quarrel between the two countries in the United Nations (Gordon and Shapiro, 2004: 148), reflecting a more general European tendency to avoid direct conflicts with the United States (see Fehl, 2008: 264). However, if this is not possible and some or all member states disagree with the United States in terms of issue perception and use of means – showing once more how the different axes of Figure 1 are interrelated – these member states have to decide whether they should follow US leadership despite these disagreements or not. In the case of Iraq, a large number of member states was in such a situation: ‘Americans perceived a much more serious threat from Iraq than did France or Germany; (...) Americans, and the Bush Administration in particular, were much less confident in the ability of non-forceful tools, such as UN inspectors, to protect them from threats’ (Finnemore, 2005: 189). The key issue was that those member states that disagreed with the United States decided to defy openly the US leadership (Gordon and Shapiro, 2004: 175). In other words, Iraq was not divisive because transatlantic relations as such came

up as an issue, but because member states followed opposing policy prescriptions regarding transatlantic relations, in particular the ‘big three’: Germany and France ultimately opposed openly the United States, whereas Britain fully supported the US-led invasion.

These different policy prescriptions stemmed from different beliefs about the transatlantic relationship. In the words of Menon (2004: 638), ‘At the heart of these [intra-European] disputes were opposing conceptions of the appropriate relationship for Europe to maintain with the United States’. More precisely, EU member states had distinct cognitive ideas about ‘what is’ the transatlantic relationship and differing normative ideas about what that relationship ‘ought to be’. Whereas some saw the transatlantic relationship within the context of a multipolar world, where the United States should be opposed if necessary, for others the United States was the indispensable superpower that should not be opposed in matters that it considers to be crucial for its security (see Gordon and Shapiro, 2004: 79-80; Menon, 2004: 638-640). British leaders, in particular Blair, believed that only a strategic partnership with the remaining superpower in the world could make the international system more secure (Menon, 2004: 638). They interpreted, thus, the transatlantic relationship in a traditionally Atlanticist way that stressed Europe’s dependence on the United States and emphasised the overarching value of the transatlantic relationship. As Blair told the Financial Times in April 2003, ‘I don’t want Europe setting itself up in opposition to America (...) I

think it will be dangerous and destabilising' (Newman and Stephens, 2003). According to Gordon and Shapiro (2004: 131), Blair even told regularly that '...he would prefer a divided Europe that was partly pro-American to a united Europe lined up against the United States'. Likewise, a more recent study highlights the importance of the value of the transatlantic alliance for the British government during the Iraq crisis (Davidson, 2011: 134).

For the French and German governments, on the other hand, the transatlantic relationship did not have the same importance. French leaders in particular saw the relationship rather as part of a broader multipolar system. In fact, a key element in the Iraq speeches of Jacques Chirac, then the French President, was Europe's common voice in a multipolar world (Bratberg, 2011). Thus, French leaders, and in particular Chirac, interpreted the transatlantic relationship in a dominantly Europeanist way, where Europe's own role took precedence over other considerations. At the eve of the invasion of Iraq, for instance, Chirac was quoted as saying 'Any community with only one dominant power is always a dangerous one (...) That's why I favor a multipolar world, in which Europe obviously has its place' (Graff, 2003). These Europeanist interpretations were paralleled in Germany by a marked foreign policy change towards a more independent stance in relation with the United States (Forsberg, 2005: 224). As the German Foreign Minister at that time pointedly said, 'alliance partners are not satellites' (Fischer, 2002). Consequently, even for Germany, 'The question at stake was

the nature of the world order and the USA's relation to its allies, no longer the single issue of Iraq' (Forsberg, 2005: 226; see Maull, 2008). In sum, Britain, France and Germany pushed their interpretations of the transatlantic relationship into opposing directions: Atlanticism, on the one hand, and Europeanism, on the other. Together with the diverging issue perceptions and beliefs about effective and legitimate means, this led to diverging interpretations that remained outside the common sphere of Figure 1, thus making common policy output impossible.

Iran

In the case of the early Iranian crisis (2002-2006), member states' perceptions of the issue at stake were very similar: First of all, they believed since the very beginning that a substantial nuclear programme with military implications existed in Iran (Everts, 2004: 675; Youngs, 2006: 77). Furthermore, member states also shared the relatively moderate intelligence assessment that it was a serious long-term concern and not a clear-cut threat (Müller, 2003: 7). Even the assessment of the British government was explicitly moderate. According to a written answer in the British parliament, 'The technology which Iran has been seeking to develop at its nuclear facilities would enable them to produce fissile material, which can be used in the production of nuclear weapons' (MacShane, 2003). In short, member states shared similar ideas about 'what is' in Iran. At the same time, European leaders avoided advocating openly regime

change in Iran, preferring engagement with the existing Iranian leadership to solve the nuclear crisis (Davidson and Powers, 2005; Müller, 2003). Thus, they also shared similar ideas about ‘what should be’.

Up to the present day, no contrary standpoints have been voiced by European government officials or diplomats, neither in public nor in personal interviews for this article. Consequently, it was possible to adopt numerous informal (Doust-Blazy et al., 2005) and formal documents, in particular 19 Council conclusions in the period under consideration in this article (2002-2006), where member states defined at the EU level what their common perception of the Iranian nuclear issue was. Most of the time the Council conclusions reflected the assessment in the first conclusions on the Iranian nuclear programme where the Union merely stated that ‘[t]he nature of some aspects of Iran’s programme raises serious concerns...’ (General Affairs and External Relations Council, 2003: 24). Until 2007 the EU even avoided to use in their official documents on Iran the terms ‘threat’ or ‘WMD’. The Iran problem was rather presented as a matter of confidence regarding almost purely technical issues such as uranium enrichment that came up after 2002.⁴ Security was basically perceived in terms of regional stability, with a special focus on the danger of a potential domino effect of nuclear proliferation, and in terms of the stability of the global non-proliferation order: ‘More nuclear weapons in this volatile region is the last thing we want. At this point the whole of the NPT [Non-Proliferation Treaty] regime would be more or less in tatters’ (Solana, 2005:

5). In sum, shared cognitive and normative ideas on Iran fostered issue perceptions of the Iranian nuclear programme that converged towards a moderate centre, thus making consensus at the European level possible.

Parallel to these converging issue perceptions, policy-makers' beliefs about the legitimacy and effectiveness of certain means also converged substantially in the case of Iran. First of all, EU member states agreed – at least in the period between 2002 and 2006 – that military force was not a useful tool to deal with the Iranian nuclear crisis. As Davidson and Powers (2005: 415-416) argue, the actual driving force behind the cooperation of France and Britain in the Iran crisis was their desire to avoid another preventive war as in Iraq. Germany was equally opposed to the use of military means. Gerhard Schröder, then the Chancellor of the Federal Republic, countered alleged US war plans against Iran with the words, '...let's take the military option off the table. We have seen it doesn't work' (New York Times, 2005). This does not mean that the European consensus on the rejection of military means was a given. In more recent years, French *sable-rattling* (Yost, 2006) and British war plans (Hopkins, 2011) indicate that the use of military force is not excluded categorically by all EU member states (see Hanau Santini, 2010: 469, 482). In fact, elite surveys (Martinez, 2006: 15) and individual analyses by experts (personal interview, Jan 2009; Everts, 2004) suggest new divisions in Europe if the United States or Israel attack nuclear installations in Iran or intensify the current acts of sabotage and targeted killings in Iran.

However, European governments did not push towards the use of force on the use-of-means axis in Figure 1. In line with the moderate issue perception outlined above, negotiations were believed to be the most legitimate and effective way to deal with Iran, above all between 2002 and 2006. For example, Jack Straw, then the British Foreign Secretary, argued that '[a] negotiated solution, in which both sides have a feeling of ownership, is in the best interests of Iran and of the international community' (Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, 2005: 4). This reflected also the more general belief in the concept of effective multilateralism as an effective tool to deal with international issues (see Sauer, 2008: 285). The initial successes of the European negotiation approach in the form of the 2003 Teheran Agreement and the 2004 Paris Agreement with Iran underpinned the belief in the effectiveness of the negotiation based approach (Seaboyer and Thränert, 2007: 102). Not surprisingly, still after years of arduous negotiations, mainly by Javier Solana, the High Representative and chief negotiator, 'The EU believes that the [Iran] issue can still be solved by negotiations' (General Affairs and External Relations Council, 2006: 13).

Even after 2005, when it became clear in the eyes of EU member states that Iran was reluctant to cooperate with the EU on the nuclear issue, European consensus on the adequate means to deal with the Iran issue did not break down. Specifically after the victory by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the Iranian presidential elections in summer 2005 and the following suspension of key provisions of the 2004 Paris Agreement by the

regime in Tehran, EU governments agreed that the best way to deal with the Iranian issue was its referral from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to the UN Security Council (Resolution 1696) and subsequent sanctions against Iran (Resolution 1737), as the nine Council conclusions between Ahmadinejad's election victory and UN Security Council Resolution 1737 show. Although there existed disagreement about the intensity of the sanctions (Sauer, 2008: 278-281, 286-288), ultimately the sanction approach prevailed. As the European Elites Survey after the first round of sanctions highlighted, this preference for a sanctions approach clearly reflected the widespread belief of European policy-makers in sanctions as the most effective way to deal with Iran (Dau, 2007: 16). In the words of Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the German foreign minister after November 2005, 'Excluding economic sanctions would be imprudent' (Aust et al., 2006). Consequently, the EU could shift its policy means from a pure negotiation based approach to one that used both negotiations and sanctions when it believed that the new approach was both more legitimate and effective.

Apart from the concrete means to be used in the Iranian nuclear crisis, the EU was also able to find a common action format that was believed to be legitimate and effective in the eyes of virtually all member states, including smaller ones (personal interviews, Dec 2008-Jan 2009), even though the initial E3 *directoire* consisting of France, Germany and the United Kingdom was highly controversial and never got an explicit endorsement by the Council. Through the inclusion of the High Representative the new

EU/E3 format got the necessary link with the rest of the EU member states to establish a common European Iran policy (see personal interviews, Dec 2008-Jan 2009; Dryburgh, 2008).⁵ In sum, similar ideas about what are effective and legitimate ways to deal with the Iranian nuclear crisis fostered converging policy prescriptions that culminated in the so-called double track approach based on negotiations and sanctions.

The main problem with the emerging EU consensus on the Iranian nuclear crisis and the most adequate means was that the United States did not agree initially with the European approach. Steven Everts (2004: 676), later a senior advisor to Solana, even spoke of ‘diametrically opposed policies’ by the EU and the United States. Other senior experts called repeatedly for stronger US-EU rapprochement concerning Iran, showing in how far the two sides actually diverged (Einhorn, 2004; Smeland, 2004: 57-64). Although the US administration suffered from some internal divisions regarding Iran between 2002 and 2005 (Kubbig, 2008), in general the US approach towards Iran was substantially more outspoken than the EU approach: It advocated regime change, strict sanctions and the further international isolation of Iran (Rudolf, 2007). The crucial point for this article is that no European government supported these more radical US positions. On the contrary, the EU as a whole opposed the more extreme policy options by the United States (Kile, 2005: 13). Even Blair argued that the British Iran strategy was ‘...different from the US administration...it is one of constructive and conditional engagement with the government of Iran’ (quoted in Davidson and Powers, 2005: 421).

More specifically, before 2005 the EU/E3 resisted several times US pressure to refer the Iranian nuclear file from the IAEA to the UN Security Council (Denza, 2005: 306), which would have implied potential sanctions, in particular in October 2003 (Marquis, 2003), i.e. shortly before the Tehran Agreement, and in September 2005 (Linzer, 2004), when it became clear that Iran had the intention to defy key provisions of the 2004 Paris Agreement. Especially in autumn 2003, it was feared that the transatlantic disagreement over Iran could even trigger another major transatlantic crisis (Black and Traynor, 2003). Furthermore, the US administration criticised and discouraged the EU/E3 negotiations with Iran from 2003 on (Warrick, 2003). Apparently, George W. Bush even asked Blair personally not to sign the 2003 Tehran Agreement (Youngs, 2006: 79). Although internal divisions within the US administration prevented a more forceful opposition to the EU approach, the United States essentially undermined the EU negotiations with Iran by continuing its strict sanctioning policy and refusing key concessions the Iranian negotiators were seeking, in particular security guarantees and support for Iran's entry in the World Trade Organization (Bergenäs, 2010: 503; Harnisch, 2007).

However, until 2005 EU governments remained firm and resisted US pressure to change its approach towards Iran. On the one hand, this resistance can be explained with the belief in the European policy prescription as being the most effective and legitimate options to deal with the Iran issue (see above), reflecting, once more, in how far the

different axes in Figure 1 are actually interrelated. But on the other hand, European governments also chose consciously a European approach distinct of the one of the United States in order to show the Americans how the European way works in practice (see Sauer, 2008: 285). Everts (2004: 675) pointed out, for example, that ‘Iran offers Europeans a chance to give substance to the idea that there is a *European* approach to managing security issues [emphasis added]’. Likewise, Thérèse Delpech (2005: 291), a senior French official, argued that ‘...success or failure of current negotiations will be seen in the wider context of the “European way”’. In this way, the interpretations on the transatlantic axis in Figure 1 moved slightly towards a more Europeanist position that helped challenge consciously American policy preferences. However, none of the European interpretations was pushed towards the extreme of a clearly articulated Europeanist position that would have led to policies defying openly the United States, e.g. by adopting a stronger pro-Iran stance concerning sensitive nuclear technology.

On the contrary, in 2005 European policies shifted clearly towards the US policy positions (Seaboyer and Thränert, 2007: 114), in particular regarding the potential referral of Iran to the UN Security Council (Kile, 2005: 19; Youngs, 2006: 82) and, for the first time, regarding the outright rejection of limited uranium enrichment activities in Iran (Sauer, 2008: 288). With this shift the Europeans reacted to all appearances to major shifts in the US Iran policy. Most notably, in the wake of Condoleezza Rice taking over the State Department in early 2005, the United States dropped several objections

that complicated the European negotiations with Iran, e.g. to Iranian membership in the World Trade Organization. On a more abstract level, however, the shift towards a more pro-American stance could not have been possible without the belief among basically all European actors that US involvement in the Iranian nuclear crisis was highly desirable to increase the effectiveness of the ongoing negotiations. Not surprisingly, the EU/E3 welcomed clearly the more active involvement of the United States in the Iranian nuclear crisis after 2005 (General Affairs and External Relations Council, 2005: 7). Likewise, Solana and the E3 foreign ministers at the time argued with a specific reference to the United States that ‘We will continue to work for a united international approach which is necessary to maximise the chances of success’ (Barnier et al., 2005: 5). In short, after the 2005 policy shifts in the US Iran policy, European interpretations converged towards a slightly more Atlanticist position, showing in how far interpretations on the axes of Figure 1 can actually move slightly from one direction into another. In combination with the congruent issue perceptions and the converging beliefs about the most effective and legitimate means, this moderate flexibility made forceful policy output by the EU possible.

Conclusions

Iraq and Iran are two clearly opposed cases of the European Union acting in international crises. They show how the European Union can become either a fairly

coherent (though not necessarily successful) actor in its own right – as during the Iranian nuclear crisis – or a deeply divided international organization – as during the 2002/2003 Iraq crisis. Such radically different foreign policy output poses a serious challenge to existing concepts of European foreign policy, as has been highlighted already by a recent review article on CFSP (Krotz and Maher, 2011: 549). The key argument of this article is that in many international crises, such as Iraq or Iran, crisis responses depend on cognitive and normative ideas that guide actions under conditions of high uncertainty. Conceptually, the question is not whether (Parsons, 2002) or whose (Acharya, 2011) ideas matter but – in line with the most recent idea based research – *how* ideas matter (Mehta, 2011: 25). More specifically, cognitive and normative ideas foster certain interpretations of a crisis along several interrelated core themes, in particular, issue perception, instrumentality and, depending on the crisis, transatlantic relations or other themes. Thus, despite the intergovernmental set-up of the CFSP, the EU does not have to reconcile or coordinate in many international crises opposing national interests based on clear-cut material constraints, but merely the different interpretations of its member states along these themes. As long as these interpretations converge, measured, though still forceful crisis responses will be likely. Yet, if they diverge, dissonance will be the probable outcome. The empirical analysis has shown how – at the European level – the interpretations of the Iraq case diverged in the three

areas of issue perception, instrumentality and transatlantic relations, whereas in the case of Iran these interpretations converged towards a moderate centre.

Comparing the results, finally, allows drawing up an indicative picture of the ideational space of Figure 1 within which the EU can find foreign policy consensus during international crises: First, the interpretation of an issue in a given situation may not tend towards the extreme form of an immediate threat for one or several EU member states, unless the circumstances are very obvious. Otherwise, it is very unlikely that all member states follow such an issue perception. In general, it is much more likely that the perceptions of an issue are found between the extremes of key and non-issue such as in the case of Iran, where its nuclear programme has been interpreted as a 'serious concern'. Secondly, as both the Iraq and Iran case have shown, the EU is able to agree on coercive measures as both effective and legitimate means. Military force, however, is much more problematic, especially if it takes the form of a full-scale invasion of another country. At the same time, pure persuasion in the form of dialogue, the other extreme option to act in an international crisis, is only a possibility if the EU does not have to deal with a concrete security problem. As the European reactions to the Iranian crisis have shown, it is very unlikely that all EU member states believe that persuasive means are the most effective and legitimate way to deal with a crisis that is considered to be serious. In practice, common EU actions typically oscillate between negotiations and sanctions. Thirdly, whenever the EU has to find consensus concerning US leadership in

an international crisis, not only over-emphasizing the importance of the transatlantic relationship but also straightforward balancing appear to be outside the limits of a collective European foreign policy, as the Iraq case suggests. Usually, the EU's relations with the United States entail both elements that emphasise the need of the transatlantic relationship and Europe's autonomy vis-a-vis the United States, as in the case of Iran between 2003 and 2006. In general, these limits of the ideational space of collective foreign policy output in international crises do not allow the EU to become a fully-fledged crisis actor any time soon, but they are certainly broader than sceptics of a common EU foreign policy may concede. In the long-term, the existence of an ideational space may even feed into the emergence of a broader European strategic culture.

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Notes

1. In general, ‘ideas’ are defined here as shared beliefs. On the ‘semi-circle’ between rationalism and reflectivism (Christiansen et al., 2001) the tendency is towards the rationalist side and ‘soft positivism’ (Tannenwald, 2005: 13-14).
2. These two cases have also been used by other studies (e.g., Maull 2008).
3. The public debate in the United Kingdom about the Iraq war has produced a huge amount of academic publications (see for example Kennedy-Pipe and Vickers, 2007; Bluth, 2004; Hoggett, 2005) and several official reports by select committees and inquiries, including the report by Lord Butler.
4. A senior diplomat of a major EU member state even complained that the EU has not been able to transmit sufficiently the potential danger of the Iranian nuclear programme (personal interview, Jan 2009).
5. Only the Italians were not completely satisfied with the new format, but they were able to gain ‘privileged information exchange’ (personal interview with E3 official, Jan 2009).

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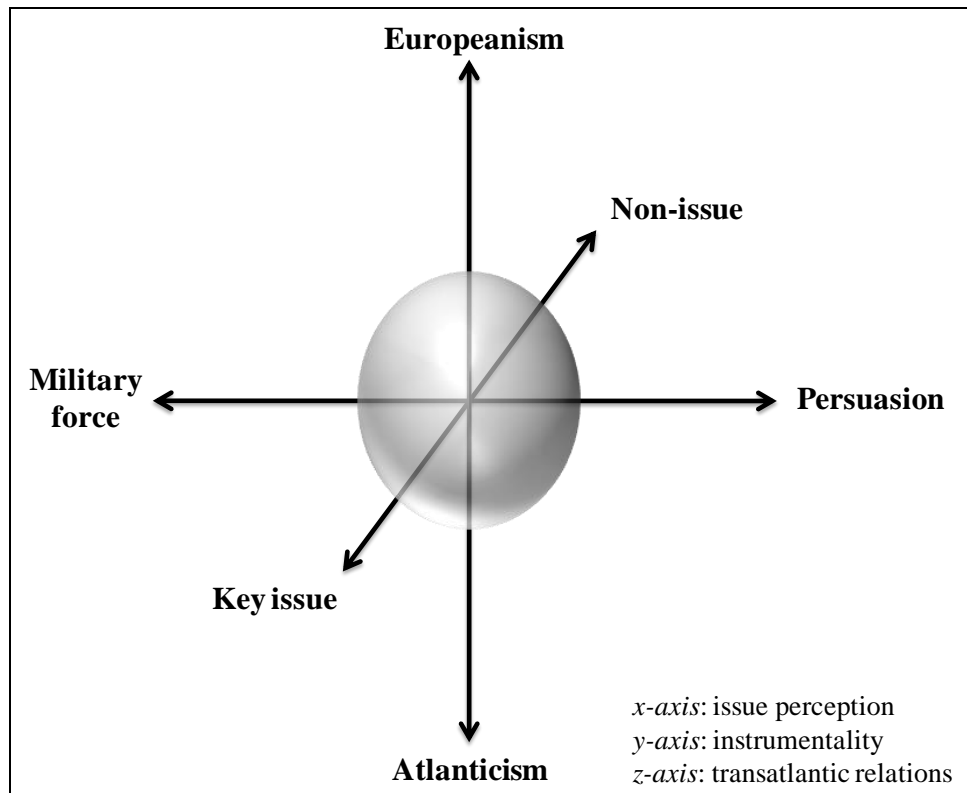


Figure 1. Ideational space of EU crisis interpretations along three key axes